

MARINE CORPS GAZETTE ARTICLE # 11, COURSE OF ACTION DEVELOPMENT: HELPING THE COMMANDER WIN A HUNDRED BATTLES

A sage once said that if you want a new idea read an old book. In perhaps no other human endeavor does this adage hold more true than in the realm of war. The soon-to-be-published Marine Corps capstone warfighting doctrine, MCDP 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*, describes the importance of understanding the relationship between the enemy, terrain, and friendly forces to help focus the planning and execution of a force to achieve an assigned mission. This concept is not new. Over two thousand years ago the Chinese military theorist Sun Tzu advised commanders that by knowing the enemy and knowing oneself a commander could be assured of victory in a hundred battles.

While the concept of focusing on the enemy, the friendly forces, and terrain may easily fit on a bumper sticker, commanders and their staffs often struggle at applying this concept during one of the most difficult step of the Marine Corps Planning Process (MCPP)—course of action (COA) development. This article will focus on the common problems that challenge commanders and planners as they conduct COA development.¹

A COA is a broadly stated potential solution to an assigned mission. The COA development step of the MCPP is designed to generate options that satisfy the mission, intent, and guidance of the commander. During COA development, planners use the battlefield framework (deep, close, rear operations; main effort; reserve; and security) to translate the commander's intent and guidance into COAs. Planners must use their judgement and experience to creatively develop different ways to accomplish the mission and achieve the desired end state. As the planners begin this creative process they would be well-served to keep Sun Tzu's simple adage in mind.

Know the Enemy

Planners must maintain a focus on the enemy. Warfare is a contest of wills between two thinking, imaginative commanders focused on achieving their own objectives. Opponents that willingly die for the glory of the friendly force are only found in fiction and among the inanimate tire targets and tank hulks of peacetime live fire ranges.

Knowing the enemy is a requirement for all Marines—not simply a job for the intelligence officer and his staff. All Marines need to understand the capabilities and doctrinal employment of their adversary if they expect to defeat their opponents. A simple example will demonstrate the power of understanding the enemy.

Assume that you are attacking an enemy force that employs a defensive doctrine based on the combination of the following tactics:

- The enemy defends on restrictive terrain and increases the effects of that terrain by developing extensive obstacles to fix attacking forces in engagement areas.
- After slowing the attacking force with an obstacle, the enemy places a high volume of massed indirect fires on the attacking force to defeat the attack.
- Armored reserves are used as a counterattack force to defeat any penetrations and to “finish” any attackers that are disrupted or disorganized by combined arms effects in established engagement areas.

Knowing how the enemy fights allows planners to develop COAs to allow us to maintain the initiative by denying the enemy the freedom of action necessary to employ his forces as he is organized, trained, and equipped. The event template produced in the intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB) process connects the enemy to the available terrain so we can determine enemy options.² We may not be able to predict enemy *intentions*, but we should be able to determine what he is *capable* of doing on a given piece of ground. Using our example, friendly planners could gain and maintain the initiative by combinations of the following actions:

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- Identifying potential enemy engagement areas during the IPB process and bypassing those areas. For those areas that cannot be bypassed, IPB should help us visualize the threat rings of enemy systems so we can determine where and when we are vulnerable to enemy attack and how we can simultaneously or systematically dismantle the enemy's ability to fight a combined arms battle.
- Attacking enemy engineer assets to deny the enemy the ability to take advantage of restrictive terrain. IPB should focus us on those areas of the battlefield where the enemy will most likely employ his engineer assets. This is the first step in finding, tracking, and attacking or disrupting this capability as a means of denying the enemy his preferred warfighting methodology.³
- Attacking the enemy's indirect fire systems with lethal and nonlethal means to prevent the enemy from massing fires. IPB should provide us with the likely locations of the enemy indirect fire system. This analysis should identify potential locations of firing units, routes between firing positions, potential observer locations, and provide an analysis of the command and control nodes required by the enemy to orchestrate his indirect fires.
- Denying the enemy the freedom of action to employ his reserves. This could be accomplished by deep attacks or deception efforts aimed at causing the premature, delayed, or ineffective commitment of the reserve. IPB identifies potential reserve assembly areas, movement routes, and timing.
- Disrupting or destroying the enemy command and control system necessary to facilitate his combined arms fight. IPB focuses on identifying command and control nodes and command relationships. IPB also allows us to analyze what options the enemy has based on his capabilities, and where his decision points may be located. Based on the enemy's options, planners identify friendly decisions and potential branches to a COA.

The MAGTF possesses impressive capabilities to produce intelligence products and analysis to support the planning process. Surprisingly, commanders and staffs frequently fail to take advantage of these capabilities and produce plans in isolation from potential enemy actions. It is incumbent upon planners to utilize the IPB process during planning to maintain a focus on the enemy and gain an understanding of the relationship between the enemy and terrain. IPB products must be more than "PowerPoint eyewash" or wall hangings; they must drive COA development. The IPB process must be complimented by a well-developed collection effort. While the IPB process is helpful in predicting *possible* enemy COAs, the *actual* COA the enemy is executing can only be determined through collection such as reconnaissance and surveillance, signals intelligence, etc.

Know Yourself

Every unit has strengths and weaknesses. Commanders and planners must thoroughly understand the capabilities of every element of the MAGTF and then use each element in its most efficient manner. The power of the MAGTF comes from its unique ability to simultaneously attack the enemy throughout the entire depth of his formations. To apply the combat power of the MAGTF to maximum effect, we must take our knowledge of the enemy and the terrain and seek options that allow us to maximize the effectiveness of our forces while simultaneously denying the enemy the ability to do likewise.

An "academic" understanding of MAGTF capabilities isn't enough. We use IPB to plan operations that take into consideration the terrain and weather in the same manner that we do with the enemy. An infantry regiment committed to an attack along a battalion-sized avenue of approach is only going to get one infantry battalion into the fight. That might be fine if the enemy is defending in company strength, but if we expect to take on a larger enemy force we are going to have to look to other capabilities to generate overwhelming combat power at the point of attack.

We must use our knowledge of the terrain and the enemy to get as much of the MAGTF as possible into the fight—and at the time and place of our choosing. The depth of our thinking has to go beyond a simple inventory of maneuver units—think about fixed- and rotary-wing sorties, artillery support,

engineers, and special munitions. As you visualize the application of friendly combat power think in terms of time as well as space. A particular asset that you may not get into the early part of the fight due to terrain limitations may be available at a later time and may provide the advantage you need to drive home the attack. We want to use the power of the MAGTF to create an unfair fight for the enemy.

COA Graphic and Narrative

Visualization of the enemy and friendly force is a powerful tool, but it's only the first step.⁴ We have to translate our mental concepts into a tangible product that will allow all the members of the MAGTF to understand how the commander expects the battle to unfold.

The COA graphic and narrative provides the initial tool for the staff to describe the conceptual planning effort in words and a picture. The COA graphic and narrative must clearly portray how the unit will accomplish the mission and explain the concept of operations. It must describe how the COA achieves the commander's vision of decisive actions, shaping actions, and sustainment through the battlefield framework. The battlefield framework consists of the battlespace organization of envisioned deep, close, and rear tactical operations as well as the organization of the force into the main effort, reserve, and security forces. The COA graphic and narrative should include the subordinate unit task and purpose with the end state; describe the task organization, type of operation, form of maneuver, array of forces, how supporting efforts relate to the main effort in both space and time, the composition and mission of the reserve (if designated); and depict control measures that delineate battlefield responsibilities. Figure 1, is an example of what a complete COA graphic and narrative could look like.

On order the MEF attacks in zone to defeat the first echelon forces. **Close Operations**—In the west, a division(-) conducts a supporting attack to fix the 121st Mechanized Brigade and cause the commitment of the 1/101st Armor Battalion. To support this attack our **deception effort** will focus on portraying this supporting attack as our main effort. Upon the commitment of the 1/101st Armor Battalion, our **main effort**, consisting of a division, conducts a flanking attack through the gap between the 221st and 321st Mechanized Infantry Brigades and defeats the 1/101st Armor Battalion. Fires will disrupt any movement of the 221st and 321st Mechanized Brigades and the enemy division's command and control. The **reserve** is a mechanized regiment (rein) that follows the main effort and is prepared to defeat a flank counterattack from either the 221st or 321st Mechanized Infantry Brigades. If not committed against the two mechanized brigades, on order it will defeat the enemy reserve, the 102nd Armor Brigade. **Deep Operations**—The wing disrupts the 102nd Armor Brigade from reinforcing the first echelon. **Rear Operations**—FSSG conducts CSS to support the main effort and conducts refuel on the move to maintain operational momentum. **Security**—Division screens the eastern flank.

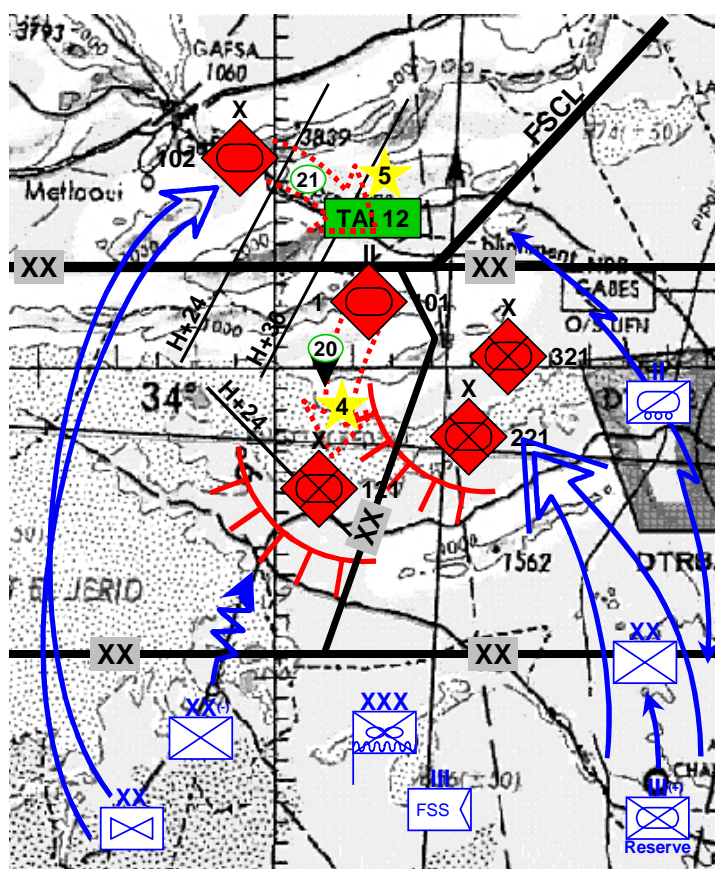


Figure 1. Sample COA Graphic and Narrative

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Developing a complete COA graphic and narrative has historically proven to be one of the biggest challenges to operational planning teams (OPTs). The COA narrative has to be more than a few bullets tacked on to the side of a PowerPoint slide. The narrative must describe the anticipated sequence of the events depicted on the graphic. This is the first step in synchronizing the actions of the friendly force and sets the stage for the more detailed synchronization effort that will take place in the wargaming step of the MCPP.

OPTs often fail to capture the details of their analysis and visualization in their COA graphic and narrative. They also fail to develop supporting concepts that are essential for synchronizing fires, maneuver, intelligence, and sustainment within their concept of operations (see figure 2). If you have the details, include them in your COA graphic and narrative. For example, if you now know you are facing the enemy's 321st Mechanized Infantry Brigade, show it in the graphic and narrative. Details like this allow planners and subordinates to more clearly focus their subsequent planning and execution. There may be specific intelligence available on the composition, organization, strength, training, and combat effectiveness of 321st Brigade that planners or subordinate commanders can use to tactical advantage. Including such details in COA development sets the stage for a more complete testing and refinement of the COA during wargaming.

Concept of Fires

The development of the concept of fires is an integrated effort by the entire OPT, not simply the fires representatives working in isolation after a scheme of maneuver has been developed. The OPT uses the commander's targeting objectives and priorities of fire. They apply the targeting process (decide, detect, deliver, and assess) to ensure that fires are synchronized with both maneuver and intelligence plans. Focusing on specific enemy units and capabilities, the OPT reviews the high-value targets (HVTs) and converts appropriate targets into high-payoff targets (HPTs) that will support the COA. Named areas of interest (NAIs) and targeted areas of interest (TAIs) are developed and intelligence collection assets requested to detect the desired HPTs. The OPT should determine the task, purpose, method (of delivery) and effects of required fires. The desired effects (disrupt, delay, limit, divert) of fires on the enemy will be determined in wargaming.

Concept of Intelligence

The concept of intelligence is more than IPB. It should indicate how intelligence will be collected, processed, analyzed, and disseminated to support the COA, other supporting concepts, and the major subordinate commands. The concept should look at the collection assets and how will they be tasked and allocated to answer the commander's critical information requirements (CCIRs), detect HPTs, and confirm or deny enemy activity and COAs at designated NAIs. The OPT's concept should be of sufficient detail that the G-2 can create the detailed collection, reconnaissance, surveillance, and target intelligence plans that will be integrated with and support the COA.

Concept of Support

No COA is complete without a plan to sustain it properly. The concept for support developed by the OPT should focus on capabilities and capacities versus requirements. The OPT may have to consider shifting of priorities, priority of work, support relationships, how units are organized, and whether to displace sustainment forward prior to going into the attack. It is better to plan an operational pause than have it imposed unexpectedly on the force.

Figure 2. Supporting Concepts

The doctrinal process for COA development is sound and provides an efficient methodology for incorporating the commander's operational design, based on his visualization of the relationship between the his force, the enemy, and the terrain. Commanders and staffs that dynamically apply this methodology

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will know the enemy and know themselves and enjoy the success in battle that Sun Tzu described. Those that ignore the process should heed Sun Tzu's warning that ignorance of the enemy and yourself places your force in peril.

¹ For more details on the COA development step of the MCPP see MSTP Pamphlet 5-0.2, *Operational Planning Team Guide*, and the MSTP COA Development Class. Both are available for viewing and download at the MSTP website – www.mstp.quantico.usmc.mil.

² For a more detailed look at the IPB process see "Intelligence Preparation of the Battlespace" in the July 2001 issue of the *Marine Corps Gazette*.

³ The OPT uses the four-step Marine Corps Targeting Process of decide, detect, deliver, and assess (D3A) to identify those targets that must be attacked to support the friendly COA. The conceptualization of D3A in the OPT is the first step in synchronizing fires with maneuver.

⁴ Operational design outlines the process for taking the commander's conceptual planning and translating his concepts into detailed plans to drive the actions of the MAGTF. For more information on operational design see Chapter 6 of MCDP 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations*, or "Operational Design" in the *Marine Corps Gazette* (May 2001).